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ABSTRACT

To test whether verbal choices in a persuasive setting would show less diversity and more qualification than those in a nonpersuasive setting, a study involving 24 college students was undertaken. The subjects were divided into five groups and each group was asked to role play two situations: one calling for the subjects merely to be conversational and the other requiring them to be persuasive. "Diversity" was operationalized with type-token ratios (TTR) and mean word length (MWL). "Qualification" was operationalized with noun-verb/adjective-adverb (NV/AA) ratios and verb/auxiliary verb (VAV) ratios. Significant TTR and directional MWL results supported the prediction of decreased diversity, and significant VAV ratio results supported the prediction of increased qualification. However, directional NV/AA ratio results were contrary to prediction. The NV/AA ratio results were interpreted as indicating that subjects coped with the conflicting demands of the persuasive situation by reducing their use of adjectives and adverbs while increasing their tentativeness through verb selection (VAV). (Author/FL)

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Persuasive Style:
Some Verbal Concomitants of Conversational Persuasion

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Persuasive Style:

Some Verbal Concomitants of Conversational Persuasion

Communication is "an activity which gains meaning and significance from consensually shared rules. . . (influencing) choices made in decoding and encoding messages" (1). Recent investigations indicate that these stylistic choices are affected by various aspects of the speaker's situation. Some relevant aspects of the "situation" are the physical setting, the social setting, the speaker's communication apprehension, the mode of communication, and the speaker's motivational state (2).

This paper focuses on the question of whether there is a verbal style specific to persuasion. Little research seems to have been done in this area. Mehrabian and Williams examined some nonverbal concomitants of persuasion (3). Marwell and Schmitt (4) and Miller and his colleagues (5) have initiated work toward identifying and categorizing compliance gaining strategies. Also the objectives of the authors of the suicide notes analyzed by Osgood and Walker (6) appear to have been somewhat persuasive. But there seems to have been little study of the verbal concomitants of conversational persuasion. By "conversational persuasion" we mean the impromptu or extemporaneous efforts at persuasion which family members or co-workers sometimes direct toward each other during their interactions. This study is an attempt to study conversational persuasion in a laboratory situation in order to test certain predictions about verbal style.

Persuasion can be defined as communication with the intent to change behavior or to influence it in a specified manner (7). This definition implies the presence of a directed intentionality on the part of the source. It also implies that the message must be somewhat acceptable to the receiver so that the source's goals can be achieved. The source in a persuasive situation should, then, have a heightened sense of purpose and a specific objective, and also wish to make his or her message acceptable to the hearer or hearers. These motives are somewhat contradictory since the source wishes simultaneously to disturb the receiver's equilibrium and to behave in a way acceptable to the receiver. If this reasoning is correct the source's verbal choices should reflect these two motivational aspects of the situation.

In particular, a heightened sense of purpose and a specific objective should cause a speaker's verbal output to become less diverse. We would expect the source to move, in a verbal sense, simply, directly and perhaps repetitiously toward his or her goal. Verbal meanderings and verbosity in the form of less familiar or more complex verbal structures should be reduced.

On the other hand, the source needs to secure the cooperation of his or her listener. Consequently we would expect the source to proceed tentatively and cautiously in order to avoid any unnecessary loss of good will and in order to gain time in which to assess the effectiveness of his or her efforts.

We are arguing, then, that communication intended as persuasive should be characterized by directness and caution. This analysis suggested the two hypotheses which were

investigated in this study:

1. In comparison to non-persuasive conversation, verbal choices in persuasive conversation will be characterized by reduced diversity.

2. In comparison to non-persuasive conversation, verbal choices in persuasive conversation will be characterized by increased tentativeness and qualification.

METHOD

The subjects were 24 undergraduate volunteers enrolled in the basic speech course at Oklahoma State University. They received extra credit for participating in the experiment. Subjects were divided into five groups (n = 4 or 5) and each group was asked to role - play two situations. In each situation the subjects played the roles of telephone repairmen interacting with their fellow workers.

The experiment was conducted in the University audio - visual studio. Each group of subjects was allowed into the studio and seated around a table by a confederate. The confederate (who did not know the nature of the research) initiated introductions and led a general discussion for approximately ten or fifteen minutes. This allowed participants to become familiar with the surroundings. Then the confederate informed the participants that they would be doing some role - playing. He instructed them to "accept the facts as given as well as assuming the attitude

supplied in your specific role" and to "let your feelings develop in accordance with the events that occur in the role - playing process."

Two role - playing situations followed. These were variations of Maier and Hoffman's new truck problem (8). In one situation the participants were given their role information and told that they were sitting around with the crew on a Friday afternoon discussing their trucks, the job and the events of the past week. In this situation they were instructed to be conversational. In the other situation each participant was told that the crew would receive one new service truck, was given the reasons why he should get the truck, and was instructed to be persuasive in his appeals for it. Each situation was allowed to continue for approximately twenty minutes. Walt, the foreman (the confederate), took a passive, non - directive role, stimulating the interaction with such remarks as "Well, what do you think, George?"

Each group role - played both situations. Three groups (n = 14) participated in the conversational situation first and then in the persuasive one. The other two groups (n = 10) role - played the persuasive situation first.

These situations involved role - playing and have limitations as such. However, the dynamics of the groups appeared authentic and the persuasive attempts seemed genuine. Participants became involved in their roles and, on occasion, quite emotional in their appeals. It was evident that they were "playing themselves" and reacting to each situation as a real one.

The entire interaction of each group was audio tape recorded. The first one hundred fifty words each participant spoke in each situation were transcribed and were considered the experimental data. Following the suggestion of Wepman and Lozar (9) contractions were expanded.

The "diversity" of verbal behavior was measured in two ways. One operational definition was the type-token ratio (TTR). The TTR is obtained by dividing the number of different words (types) by the total number of words (tokens) in a message. In this case the number of tokens was 150 in every case. The TTR ranges in value between 0 and 1, becoming smaller to to the extent that a speaker is repetitious in word selection (10).

The second operational definition of "diversity" was mean word length (MWL). The MWL is the average number of letters per word in a message. As rare words tend to be longer than common words this statistic reflects the relative rareness of the words used in the passage (11). Rather than measuring the frequency with which the same words occur as the TTR does, the MWL indexes the relative rareness of the words which are used.

The degree of "qualification" present in the Subjects' verbal behavior was measured in two ways. The first operational definition was the Noun-Verb/Adjective-Adverb (NV/AA) ratio. The NV/AA ratio is obtained by dividing the total number of nouns and verbs in a passage by the total number of adjectives and adverbs. It is similar to the earlier adjective-verb quotient (12) but is more broadly based in the sense that it uses more of the available data by including nouns and adverbs. The NV/AA ratio

was developed by Osgood and Walker to measure the tendancy toward modification of noun and verb forms. The NV/AA ratio decreases with increased modification of assertions and increases with more discriminative qualification (13).

The second operational definition of "qualification" was the Verb/Auxiliary Verb ratio (VAV). This is an adaptation of a measure used by Osgood and Walker (14). It is calculated by dividing the total number of auxiliary verbs (e. g. should, could, can) into the total number of main (non-auxiliary) verbs. The fewer auxiliary verbs used, the more direct is the statement and the larger the VAV ratio. The more auxiliary verbs used per main verb the more tentative is the statement and the smaller the ratio. So a high VAV indicates flat, direct, present or past tense verb statements. Smaller VAVs indicate the use of more qualified, tentative assertions.

The data from each Subject was typed into VSBASIC stream oriented computer files and analyzed by a set of VSBASIC programs designed to derive measures of verbal style (15). The TTR was computed by a program which matched each word with every other word in the text. Consequently this measure was derived from the complete transcribed text. The MWL (Mean Token Length), NV/AA ratio and VAV ratio were calculated by a program which matched the words of the text against an internal lexicon. The lexicon was based on a list compiled by Wepman and Lozar (16). In the present experiment their list was expanded to ensure that more than 95% of all the words used in each Subject's text matched the lexicon. (In fact the only words not matched were colloquial

expressions and proper nouns used by a single participant only once.)

The lexicon program was applied to each data file. The printout consisted of the number of words matched, the percentage matched, the MWL, NV/AA ratio, VAV ratio and numbers of times each word occurred. The ratios and percentages output by the TTR and LEXICON programs were used in the statistical analyses. Each of the four statistical measures of verbal style was analyzed with a three - way, repeated measures ANOVA. The experimental variables were Order (conversation - persuasion, persuasion - conversation), Sex (male, female) and Condition (conversation, persuasion). Order and Sex were treated as variables in order to control for variance possibly originating from differences in sequence of manipulation or sex of respondents. The SAS General Linear Models procedure with type two sums of squares was used (17). Significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

As can be seen in Table 1, the ANOVA of TTR data yielded results showing a single significant main effect for condition. Inspection indicated that the TTR was lower in the persuasion condition (M = .509) than in the conversation condition (M = .573). This indicates that there was greater variety or diversity in the conversational verbal behavior than in the persuasive verbal behavior and supports Hypothesis 1.

Results from the ANOVA of MWL data are reported in Table 2.

There were no significant results. Two effects did approach statistical significance however: a main effect for Condition ($p < 0.10$) and an Order by Condition interaction ($p < 0.07$). The Condition main effect was in the expected direction with MWL decreasing from the conversational condition ($M = 3.73$) to the persuasion condition ($M = 3.63$). The form of the Condition by Order interaction was that the effect described above did not occur in the persuasion - conversation order with the same strength as in the conversation - persuasion order. In fact, the women (but not the men) in the persuasion - conversation order actually used longer words in the persuasion condition. These results failed to support Hypothesis 1.

The NV/AA ratio results are reported in Table 3. There were no significant effects. Two main effects did, however, approach significance, Order ($p < 0.07$) and Condition ($p < 0.11$). The near significant Order effect is due to higher NV/AA ratio scores in the persuasion - conversation order ($M = 2.40$) than in the other order ($M = 2.03$). The pattern of results for the Condition main effect is for the NV/AA ratio to be higher in persuasion ($M = 2.34$) than conversation ($M = 2.03$). This trend is in the direction opposite to that predicted as it shows a relatively decreased use of adjectives and adverbs in the persuasion condition. These results do not support Hypothesis 2.

The results of the ANOVA of VAV ratio data are reported in Table 4. A single significant main effect for Condition was noted. There was relatively greater use of complex verb forms in the persuasive condition ($M = 1.21$) than in the conversation

condition (M = 1.56). This finding supports Hypothesis 2. Inspection of the means revealed that the shift in the ratio was due both to an increase in the use of auxiliary verbs in persuasion (c = 16.04, p = 18.25) and to a decrease in the use of main (non - auxiliary) verbs in persuasion (c = 22.54, r = 20.75).

Several of these verbal style results support the experimental hypotheses. The situation is considerably clearer concerning Hypothesis 1, however, than Hypothesis 2.

DISCUSSION

Hypothesis 1 expressed the expectation that Subjects would exhibit less diversity in their verbal choices in the persuasive condition. The TTR data supported this prediction while the MWL data were consistent with the prediction but fell short of statistical significance.

In previous research the TTR has been shown to be negatively correlated with measures of anxiety and high drive states (18). These findings suggest that the sense of purpose and objective in a persuasive situation may heighten the arousal of the speaker with consequent stylistic effects. This heightened arousal may inhibit the performance of less - well - learned behaviors (i.e. less frequently used words) causing a temporary reduction in usable vocabulary and a reduced TTR (19). This desire to persuade may also make a speaker reluctant to yield the floor. In an attempt to retain the speaking role an advocate may fall back on repetition of previous ideas and reasons when she or he runs

out of new ones. Such repetition would reduce TTR and diversity.

Inspection of the data indicates that both vocabulary reduction and repetition occur. The reduction in MWL, although not statistically significant, is consistent with the first explanation since more frequently used (and thus better learned) words tend to be shorter (20). The transcripts reveal a good deal of repetition also. Speakers would begin an appeal with a general statement. This would be followed by supporting reasons. Then, before yielding the floor, the advocate would often repeat the opening statement.

Both vocabulary reduction and repetition seem useful to the advocate. The use of simpler, more familiar words increases an advocate's chances of having ideas understood and accepted. Repetition has been shown to be a determinant of opinion change. According to Wilson and Miller (21) the persuasive impact of a repeated argument decays less rapidly than that of the nonrepeated argument. It is not too surprising then that both greater vocabulary reduction and repetition occur in persuasion.

The results offer less obvious support for Hypothesis 2. The VAV ratio data is consistent with predictions and suggest the use of more tentative verb forms. "Do this" is softened to "you could do this." But the NV/AA ratio, while not statistically significant, reveals a pattern contrary to predictions. It was expected that persuasion would call forth the use of relatively more adjectives and adverbs but the results were the reverse. Subjects appear to have become more tentative in their verb forms but there is no evidence of increased reliance on adjectives and

adverbs.

The inital prediction was that advocates would qualify their statements in an attempt to avoid offense. This seems to have happened but in a lexically restricted way. It was expected that they would adopt more qualifiers (adjectives and adverbs). Instead they used approximately the same, or fewer numbers of qualifiers and altered the verb forms.

In retrospect this pattern of responses can be understood as a Subject's response to the predicted conflicting motives inherent in a persuasive situation. An advocate must simultaneously ask for change from the hearer and also remain acceptable to the hearer. The use of an increased number of adjectives and adverbs may qualify the advocate's statements, as predicted, but it may also intensify the message. The use of more complex grammatical structures may be inconsistent with and curtailed by the reliance on a restricted vocabulary. If this is the case subjects appear to have resolved this conflict by not using adjectives and adverbs, and by relying on simpler noun - verb sentences thus yielding the increased NV/AA ratio. The desired tentativeness was achieved with softened verb forms decreasing the VAV ratio. Such an explanation seems consistent with the observed results.

The results appear to support the basic ideas presented in this paper. Advocates tend to adopt verbal stylistic patterns which are less diverse and more tentative in conversational persuasion than in non-persuasive conversations.

Definitive conclusions in this area must await additional

research as this study is limited by its reliance on a small number of college students in a role-playing situation. The purpose of this paper was to explore two areas of expected difference and to demonstrate the possibility and desirability of further research. Other studies might examine the persuasive and non-persausive behaviors of other groups of people in more realistic settings.

Footnotes

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11. Joan M. Preston and R. C. Gardner, "Dimensions of Oral and Written Language Fluency," Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior 6 (1967): 936-945.

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13. Osgood and Walker, "Motivation and Language Behavior."

14. Ibid., 62.

15. The four VSBASIC programs used to create, edit and analyze the texts were written by J. C. Sherblom and A. P. Sherblom for TSO use on a 370/158 IBM computer. Copies are available from the first author.

16. Wepman and Lozar, "Most Frequently Used Words."

17. Anthony J. Barr, James H. Goodnight, John P. Sall and Jane T. Helwig, A User's Guide to SAS 76 (Raleigh: SAS Institute, 1976).

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TABLE 1

TYPE-TOKEN RATIO THREE-WAY ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR REPEATED MEASURES

ORDER	SEX (n)	CONDITION	
		Conversation	Persuasion
1) Conversation - Persuasion	Male (6)	.590	.520
	Female (8)	.592	.495
2) Persuasion - Conversation	Male (7)	.538	.514
	Female (3)	.571	.515

Source	df	SS	F	PR > F
Between				
Order(A)	1	.0032	1.07	.3122
Sex (B)	1	.0000	.00	.9641
A * B	1	.0021	.71	.4082
Subject (A * B)	20	.0604		
Within				
Condition (C)	1	.0486	21.49	.0002
A * C	1	.0053	2.35	.1408
B * C	1	.0023	1.02	.3249
A * B * C	1	.0023	1.02	.3249
Subject * C(A*B)	20	.0000		

TABLE 2

MEAN WORD LENGTH THREE-WAY ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR REPEATED MEASURES

ORDER	SEX (n)	CONDITION	
		Conversation	Persuasion
1) Conversation - Persuasion	Male (6)	3.79	3.61
	Female (8)	3.80	3.63
2) Persuasion - Conversation	Male (7)	3.68	3.61
	Female (3)	3.53	3.75

Source	df	SS	F	PR > F
Between				
Order(A)	1	.0398	.98	.3338
Sex (B)	1	.0004	.01	.9163
A * B	1	.0019	.05	.8314
Subject (A * B)	20	.8107		
Within				
Condition (C)	1	.1131	3.16	.0905
A * C	1	.1330	3.72	.0681
B * C	1	.0328	.92	.3496
A * B * C	1	.0328	.92	.3496
Subject * C(A*B)	20	.0543		

TABLE 3

NOUN-VERB/ADJECTIVE-ADVERB THREE-WAY
ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR REPEATED MEASURES

ORDER	SEX (n)	CONDITION	
		Conversation	Persuasion
1) Conversation - Persuasion	Male (6)	1.97	2.03
	Female (8)	1.98	2.11
2) Persuasion - Conversation	Male (7)	2.23	2.77
	Female (3)	1.79	2.54

Source	df	SS	F	PR > F
Between				
Order(A)	1	1.2850	3.67	.0699
Sex (B)	1	.1150	.33	.5731
A * B	1	.3845	1.10	.3074
Subject (A * B)	20	7.0084		
Within				
Condition (C)	1	1.1439	2.84	.1076
A * C	1	.7738	1.92	.1811
B * C	1	.0427	.11	.7482
A * B * C	1	.0427	.11	.7482
Subject * C(A*B)	20	.0119		

TABLE 4

VERB/AUXILIARY RATIO THREE-WAY
ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR REPEATED MEASURES

ORDER	SEX (n)	CONDITION	
		Conversation	Persuasion
1) Conversation - Persuasion	Male (6)	1.42	1.40
	Female (8)	1.47	1.24
2) Persuasion - Conversation	Male (7)	1.94	1.04
	Female (3)	1.16	1.12

Source	df	SS	F	PR > F
Between				
Order(A)	1	.0151	.03	.8642
Sex (B)	1	.3197	.64	.4340
A * B	1	.2228	.44	.5127
Subject (A * B)	20	10.0328		
Within				
Condition (C)	1	1.4630	5.02	.0366
A * C	1	.5641	1.94	.1794
B * C	1	.1026	.35	.5596
A * B * C	1	.1026	.35	.5596
Subject * C(A*B)	20	.7670		